Shambo

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.

In 1991 Sheffield based Hi-Tec Software/PAL Developments - on hiatus from their usual 'bread and butter' Hanna-Barbera licensed games - pulled off their best Ikari Warriors/Commando/Dogs of War/Rambo impersonation. What they dreamt up was a humourous little budget title known as Blazing Thunder. It's dripping with tongue-in-cheek '80s muscleman machismo, and surprisingly enough, it's not too shabby.

Behind the scenes, the three man development team consisted of Gary Antcliffe (programming), Richard Morton (graphics) and Howie Davies (audio).

After leaving Hi-Tec in February 1992, Gary and Richard moved onto Core Design where current freelance 3D Environment Artist and Game Designer, Richard, turned his attention to Chuck Rock 2 and the Tomb Raider series, while recently employed ARM GPGPU Engineer, Gary, focused on Universe and Tomb Raider. Ever since they have continued to

work in the IT industry feathering careers too extensive to quickly summarise here.

Howie Davies, on the other hand, is a mystery. He also composed the music for Yogi's Great Escape in 1990. That aside I'm at a loss.

Totally self-aware, the game opens with a title screen depicting 'Rambo' having an explosive tete-a-tete with a tank and jet plane armed to the gritted teeth with a rocket launcher as strapping as he is. It even has the Rambo insignia scrawled in the top right corner as if by way of a confession.

Judging by the next screen and the wiry hairdo, Blazing Thunder's Rambo appears to have been based on Queen's Brian May rather than Sly Stallone. Unless maybe graphician, Richard Morton, simply struggled to recreate the true majesty of his Samsonic mane... or Sly's lawyers were more on the ball than Brian's? ;)

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DEVELOPMENTS

Let's see if the manual can help to set the scene...

> "The year is 2059, Zimmerad military supremacy reigns the planet but another feeble attempt to overthrow the regime is underway. Armed with the remaining pieces of hardware, this is the people's final chance for freedom."

Curiously the same line of text is printed on the back of the box except the hardware is described as "miniature". I can't decide if this is a typo or Hi-Tec were going for some kind of Micro-Machines vibe. I suppose our protagonist (who I'm going to christen 'Shambo' because Hi-Tec forgot to name the poor guy) *is* nearly as big as his Tonka toy tank and some of his standard vehicular opponents are about the same size. Regardless the idea is never really expanded upon in the game or the remainder of the manual (essentially just a single page).

Whatever the animus, the arcadey, SNK-esque visuals are neatly crafted and ironically cutesy given the death-mongering, slaughter-fest sentiment. As adorable as the ickle soldy-woldiers are, no doubt Blazing Thunder still caused the German authorities a collective hernia and a few sleepless nights. Didn't everything?

We'll move on shall we. What else can the manual tell us about our predicament? I hope there's going to be a Hot Wheels tie-in of some sort. I'm always up for a spot of pull-back loop-de-looping or mouth brrm brrm brumming.

> "Due to a freak course of events a hole is forced open within the time-space continuum, causing one of the tanks to be sent back in time, only to materialise in the midst of yet another battle. The only way to survive is to win!"

So unless I'm misinterpreting this, I gather the idea is to preemptively claw back political control prior to the

Zimmerad thugs' rise to power, thereby making the future a more chilled out, happier place to kick back as a Rambo impressionist, granting you carte blanche freedom to host kid's birthday parties, deliver corporate speeches decked out in a bedraggled, bloodstained vest, and so on.

> "Armed only with your personalised tank it is your mission to terminate the evil dictator and all his minions."

In most of these top-down one-man-army 'sims' you begin on foot and clambering into a military vehicle carelessly left unlocked by the opposition is an occasional and short-lived bonus. Here you live *entirely* in your mobile cabriolet sanctuary, the *personalised* variety no less, whatever that means. Are these something you can buy at Clinton's along with your greetings cards for all those special occasions? How would you customise *yours*? Party streamers, go-faster stripes, tinted windows, how about a built-in sauna and 3D TV?

Khaki camouflage or yellow on pink Blobby polkadot, your hulking infantry-crusher is ma-hoos-sive. So vast in fact it's difficult to see what's creeping up on you next, leaving you precious little time to react. Your only hope of keeping it all in perspective is to never stay still, making for a frantic, madcap experience perfect for those of you who are perpetually wired through caffeine overdose.

> "You must venture through 5 different scenarios destroying all forms of resistance which may include... hosts of enemy troops, troop carriers, fighter jets, armoured jeeps, attack helicopters, remote emplacements."

We begin rooted firmly in Sly Stallone tributeville - the Vietnam jungle of Rambo II, progressing to the Afghan dessert of Rambo III - before running out of steam, and sequels for inspiration. What follows is a chemical plant locale, some kind of space station base built on top of a lava pit, and finally an urban street backdrop.

Actually nothing at all to do with Blazing Thunder. Accidents happen, you know how it is when you're Spitting Images out left, right and centre!

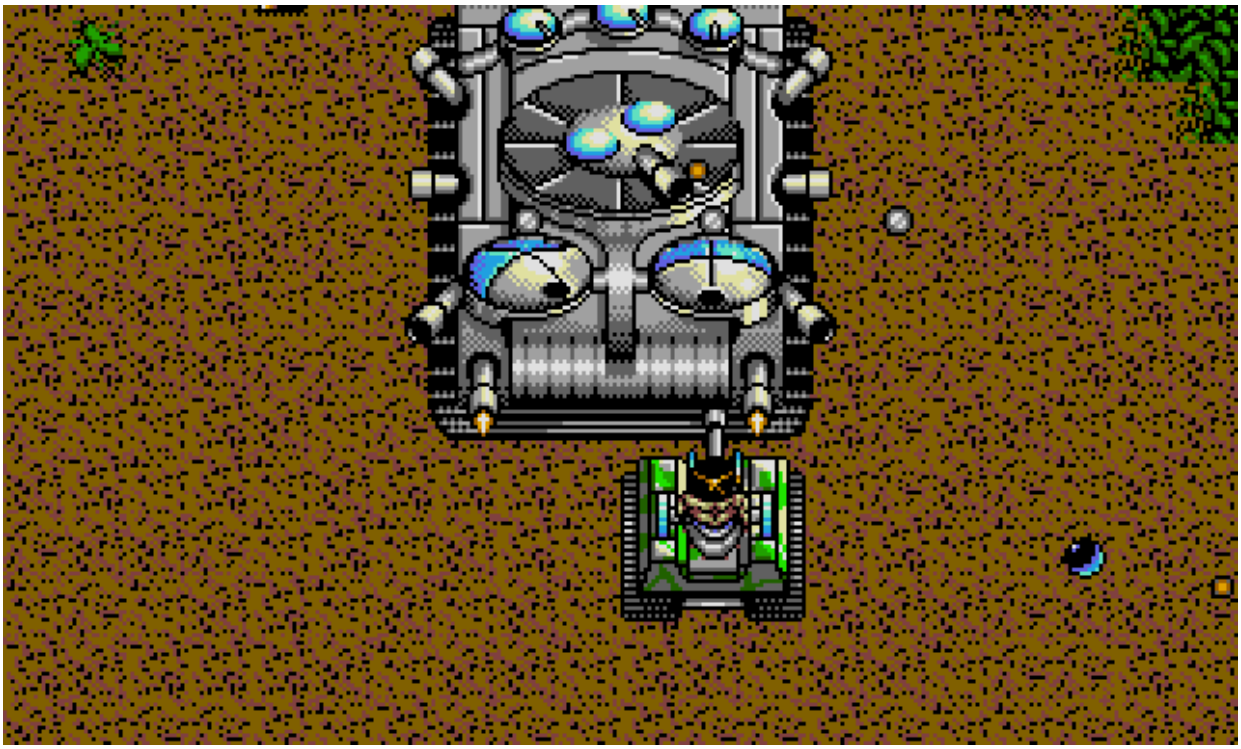
Your foes aren't the most hospitable bunch. Instead of a nice bottle of Merlot they'd rather bring flamethrowers and rocket launchers to the party. Charming. Anyone would think they're engaged in some kind of hostile civil war!

Still, you can almost forgive them seeing as they at least have the decency to turn up embodying an inventive medley of personas; there's the cool cavemen flashing their designer shades and garish fur skin outfits, punk rockers, cyborg cyclopes and hip sk8ter boyz. Each wields a different weapon (flamethrower, bazooka, rocket launcher etc.) determined by the level in which they appear.

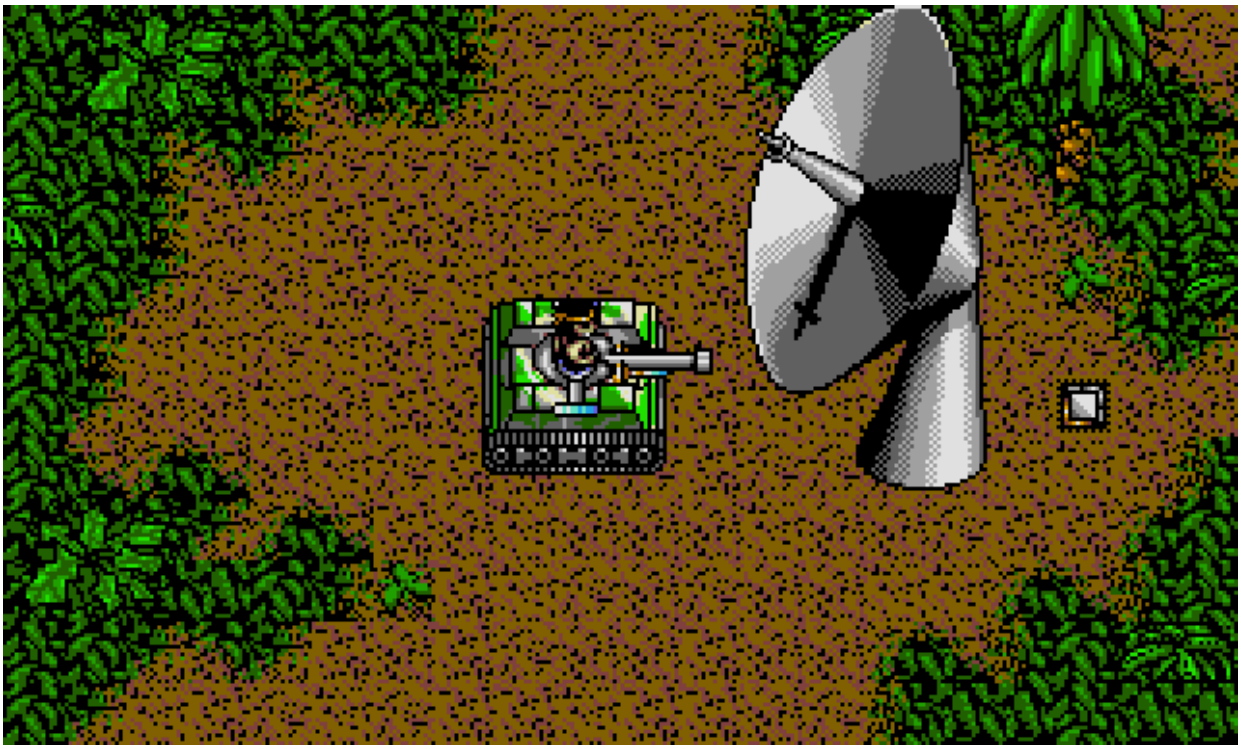
If it all gets a bit intense and bloody it's worth remembering you can collect 'E' pills to replenish your energy ('S' pills and square shimmering mines do the opposite so give those a wide birth), and 'C' pills confer temporary invulnerability. You begin with two lives, though can hoover up additional ones by running over '1up' icons, and weapon shots can be multiplied with 'P' pills.

"To help you on your way your tank can be re-armed with a number of weapons, e.g. shells, firebombs, flame throwers, guided missiles, plasma lasers, lightning bolts.

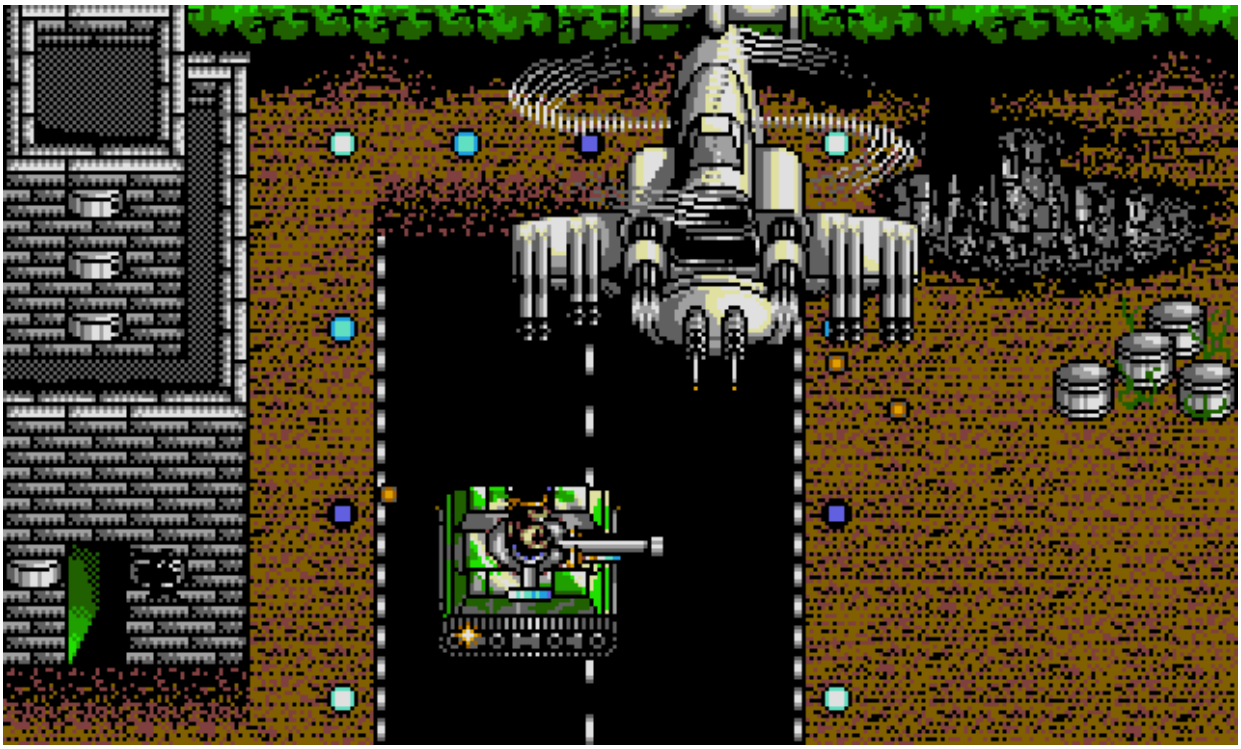
At the end of each level an extra-large enemy vehicle must be dealt with before you can progress to the next scenario. Your ultimate challenge will come when you face the robot guardian upon reaching the end of level 5."



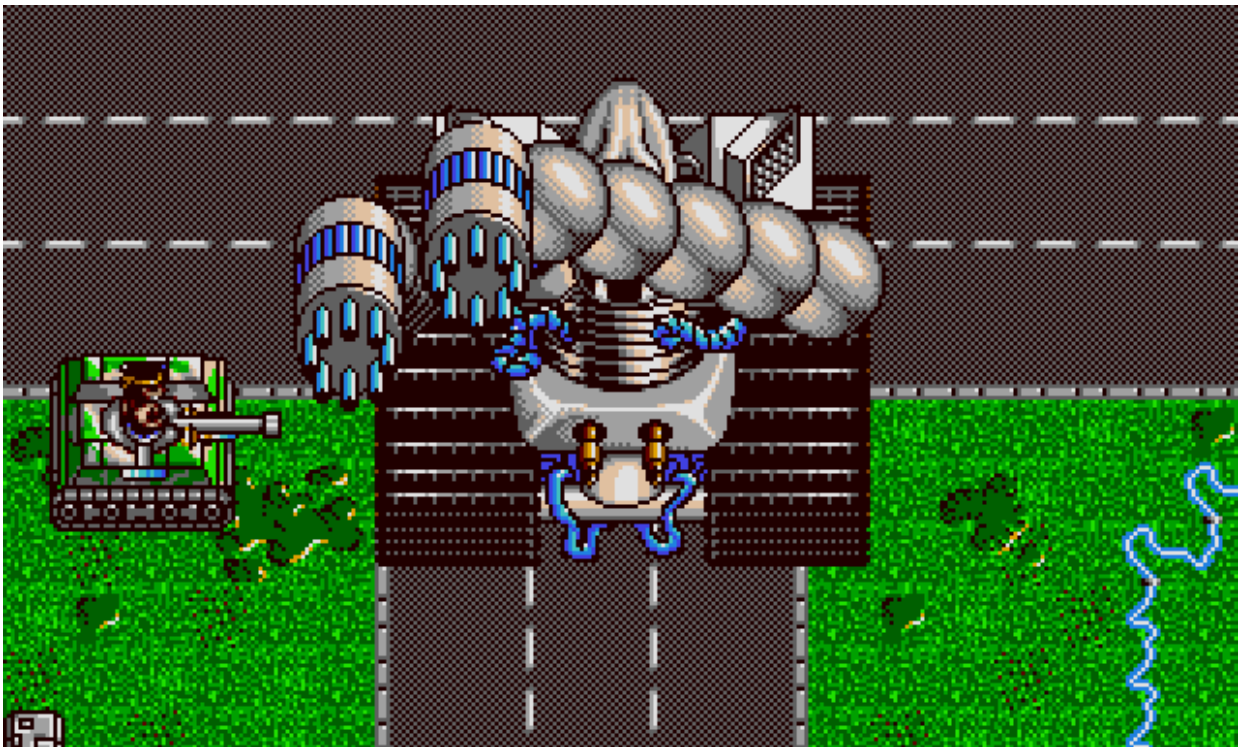
Manual narrating dude ain't wrong you know. At the end of the first stage you're confronted by a colossal tank with a multitude of rotating turrets, plus fixed side arms. With that out of the way, you can destroy the satellite dish slightly off to the north, putting the kibosh on the Zimmerad army's ability to watch 'Toddlers and Tiaras' (it's only on Sky, I've heard) thereby weakening their moral.

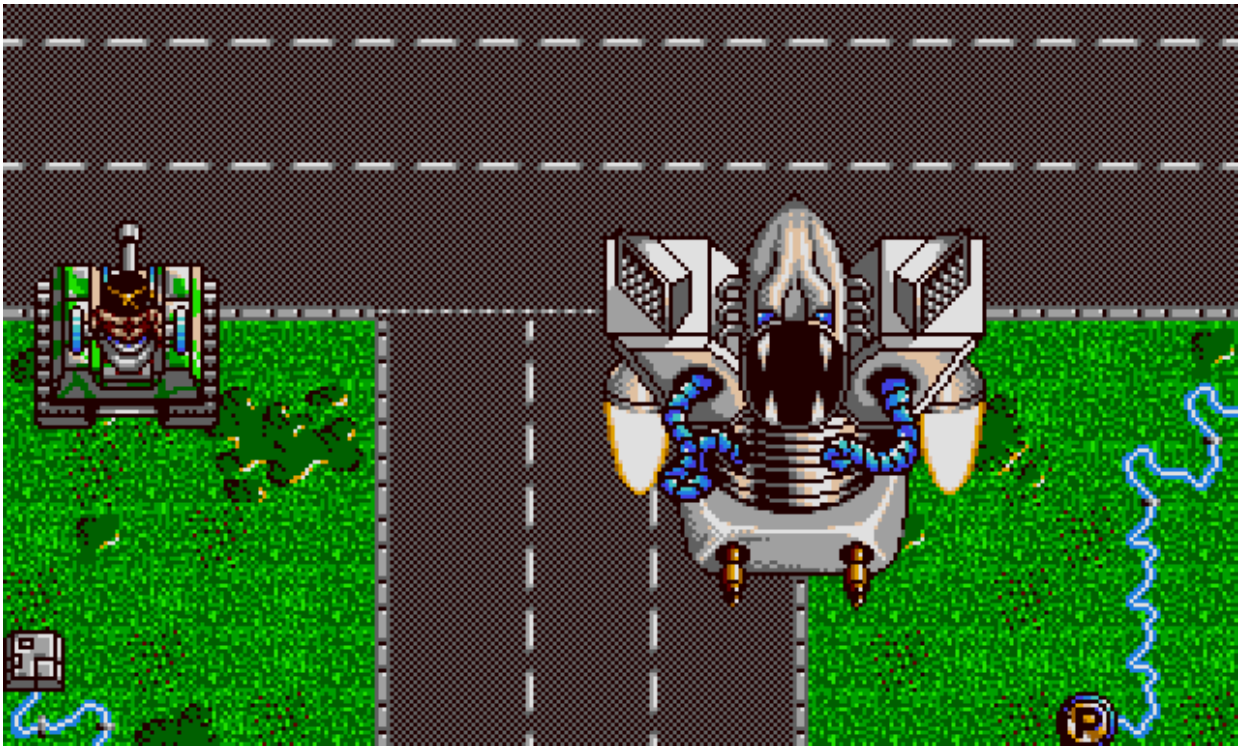


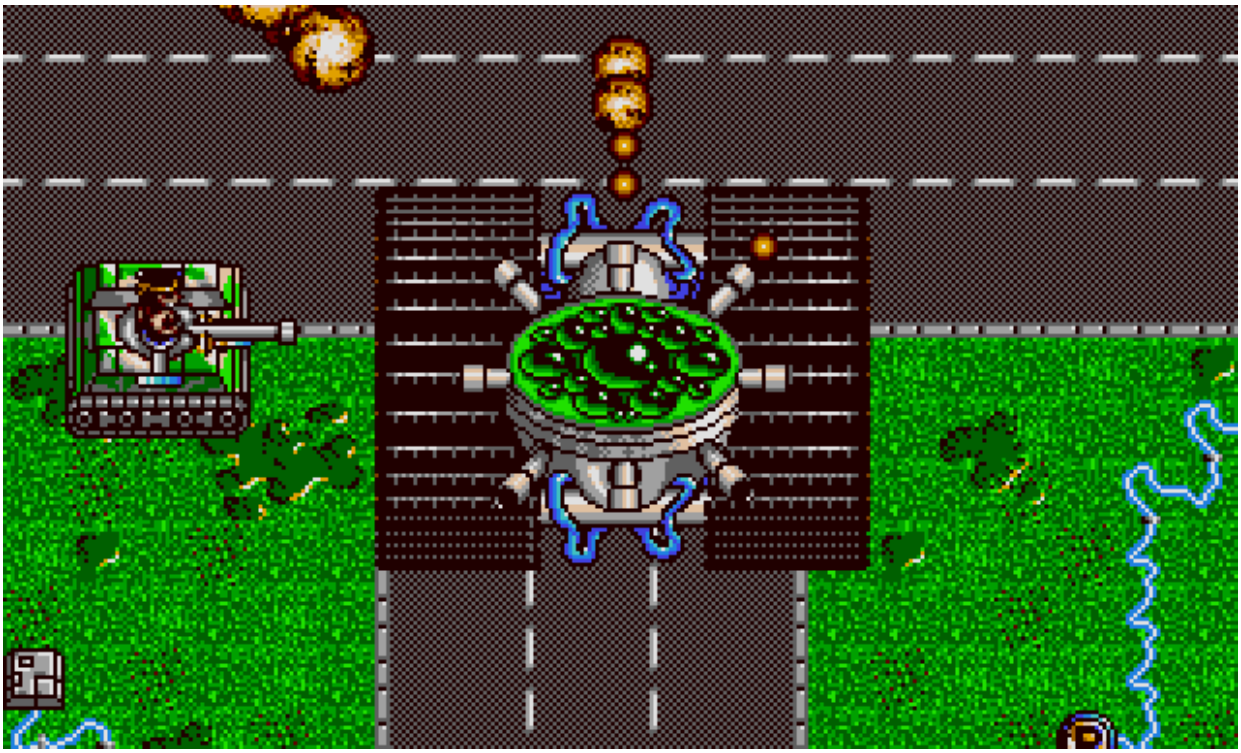
Level two's boss is an Apache chopper remarkably similar to the ones that crop up so often in the Rambo movies (also compare and contrast with the level one boss from Mercs). A plasma-ball-spewing supercomputer represents the main hurdle in level three, while the mother of all jet fighters is guaranteed to test your mettle winding up stage four.



The final obstacle standing in your way is a looming, fanged robot on caterpillar tracks armed with Gatling guns mounted on ball-jointed extendo-arms that also happens to fire devastating laser beams from its gaping mouth whenever the moods takes it. Disassemble its upper defences and what remains is a kind of green gemstone ornamental garden inside a visor, or is it an alien brain? Whatever the case may be, its multiple flamethrowers remain a threat so don't stop to admire the scenery. Keep pummelling the overgrown tin can (preferably with those precious grenades activated using the space bar) and wait for the fireworks.







We're eventually rewarded with a "well-done soldier, you really kicked butt" communique for our trouble. A silhouette of a triumphant, flag-waving Shambo wielding his signature Bowie knife standing over a cowering, defeated dictator ensues. "The evil dictator has been slain" we're informed.

Jolly hockey sticks! ...and we were all home in time for tea and jammy scones. Henceforth the benevolent Galoob Toy Foundation ran the free world with a philanthropic rod of prismatic butterflies and pixie dust presided over by King Lewis and Queen Barbara.

Children everywhere grew up knowing the supreme joy of owning a duel layer transport carrier loaded with gleaming new Micro Machines, though certainly not the ridiculous Hasbro ones based on Star Wars vehicles that never existed in the movies. These were outlawed under this sensible new regime on account of being shameless cash-ins aimed at exploiting sprogs too young to understand the true meaning of The Force.